

# Children and parents share common ground on sex education, project shows

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Primary school children would like to learn about love, intimacy and being close as part of their sexuality education in school - and their parents would like that too, a project in Geelong has revealed.

In fact parents and children have more in common on what they believe should be taught in [school](#) sexuality education than differences, said Deakin researchers on the project and sexuality education experts, Dr Deb Ollis and Associate Professor Lyn Harrison.

The Sexuality Education and Community Support (SECS) project which is being run over five years, is a partnership between Northern Bay College, Deakin University, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), Family Planning Victoria, and local and regional [health agencies](#). A key driver of the project is Barwon Health.

With the support of parents and the school community it has set out to change the way sexuality education is taught in the college and assist other schools in the region to do the same.

Sexuality education within primary schools throughout the Geelong district has mirrored the situation elsewhere in Australia according to the Deakin researchers.

Barwon Health's Susan Parker who has been running programs for schools in Geelong and who coordinator of the project team said: "it has

been taught sporadically and as you would expect there has been great variation in content and style between the schools with the result that many schools did not teach sexuality education in primary school at all.

"Those that did provide education on these themes in the later years tended to limit it to brief presentations about [puberty](#) by outside professionals or school or community nurses or teachers specialising in the area.

"These sessions focussed on behavioural change and had few if any links to other curriculum content."

Ms Parker said schools that did rely on teachers to deliver their sexuality education classes were dependent on the confidence of the teacher involved.

"As a result these programs were not transferrable across schools or even across staff within the same school," she said.

Principal of Northern Bay College, Mr Fred Clarke, said the question of what the school was doing about sexuality education had been raised by parents at two separate campuses.

"They weren't aware the same question was being asked at another campus," he said.

"When we looked more closely at it we went yeah, that's right it's something we don't do."

Mr Clarke said the school amalgamations and the creation of the Northern Bay P-12 College as part of the Barwon South West – Corio – Norlane regeneration project had allowed the school to revise how it was teaching sexuality education to make it relevant, consistent, sustainable

and cohesive.

While admitting to some nervousness initially, Mr Clarke said the sequential program which was integrated into the curriculum, went from Prep to Year 9 reached 1700 students and had united the college together.

"We now have something that is pretty special, if it had come from the top down it might have been a problem but this was initiated by the parents," he said.

"It is an evidence based program and it has been a whole of college approach and a way of bringing teachers from different campuses together," he said.

"As part of the training the teachers did talk about the aspects they felt nervous or uncomfortable about but by the end of the training they felt really comfortable."

Dr Ollis said one of the aims of sexuality education curriculum was to get away from the old model of disease and fear to one that is about a positive view of our sexuality and health.

"This project is the start of that," she said.

Dr Ollis said the first phase of the project had looked at the teachers', parents' and students' views on sexuality education as well as improving teachers' skills in the area.

"For the teachers some of the key issues were that sexuality education with a focus on respectful relationships as well as biological changes should be core to any program that should start in Prep," she said.

"Teachers felt confident and informed parents were seen as vital to success but they were also concerned about parental backlash."

Dr Ollis said parents like their children thought that love and being close were important for their children to learn.

"Parents overwhelmingly support school based sexuality education for their children, with most seeing it as a partnership between parents and the college," she said.

Dr Ollis said 60% of parents wanted information from teachers and the school about how to talk to their children and to assist with sexuality education.

"Religion, culture, confidence and language were seen as possible barriers to their involvement," she said.

Dr Ollis said parents thought children should learn about masturbation, but were unsure about the inclusion of sexual pleasure and sexual diversity in sexuality education.

"In contrast a significant number of students did not want to include masturbation," she said.

"This is not surprising as it is embarrassing and difficult to talk about.

"There is also a gender difference - there is still an assumption that girls don't masturbate.

"Boys want to know significantly more about sex and sexual feelings than girls and also know more about masturbation and love than girls.

"This was broken down by year level with the grade sixes wanting to

know more about these matters than the year fives."

Dr Ollis said boys also wanted to know more about contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and feeling safe, than girls.

"Boys are most interested in discrimination and the law while girls are most interested in knowing what to do," she said.

"When it came to getting information, students would not seek advice from the internet or teachers but were likely to ask mum over dad."

All primary campuses of Northern Bay College have begun implementing whole-school sexuality education from Prep to year eight, and providing information about this to [parents](#) and families.

The partnership will now focus on the year 9 – 12 component of the project, as well as enhancing further parent engagement in sexuality education, and beginning to support other schools regionally.

**More information:** [Building Capacity in Sexuality Education – The Northern Bay College Experience](#), Deb Ollis, Lyn Harrison and Anthony Richardson

Provided by Deakin University

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